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OLD BALLAD BURTHENS

By JOSEPHINE MCGILL

THE exhaustive study to-day devoted to Folk-Song and Folk-Dance inevitably leads to a consideration of the refrain—that most venerable and distinctive element of communal song and dance, actually the mark of the old song's choral origin. So significant is this structural feature—the repetition of word, phrase, sentence—it has been said that all the earliest ballads and other traditional songs once had a refrain or burden, their link with “the dance, work or play of the people, going back to that choral repetition which is the protoplasm of all poetry.”

Professor Gummere thus quoted recalls that of the five hundred and two Scandinavian ballads in an authoritative collection only twenty lacked refrains; while the Child collection of three hundred and five English and Scottish ballads contains one hundred and six showing in some version evidence of refrain or chorus. It has been suggested that the four line ballad stanza is but an outgrowth of the original two line form with a double refrain, exemplified in this version of The Greenwood Side found among the ballads surviving in the Kentucky mountains:

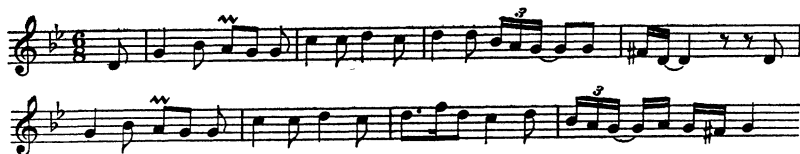
There was a lady in yonders town,
Alone, alonie O;
She's taken her a walk one day—
Down by the greenwood sidey O.

During a visit to the Kentucky mountains—that region so rich in such survivals—among the most valued of the songs there collected were those still retaining a vestige of the repetition which has been pronounced the “organic test,” the “fundamental fact” of ballad structure; hence in hearing these old songs there was added to the interest of their survival the pleasure of listening for the possible refrain with its beauty, its identity with versions from other sources.

Of the refrains which have migrated to America the same generalization may be made as that which applies to those found elsewhere: some have a relation, if but one of mere suggestion, with the main idea of the song; others seem to have been used purely for their rhythmical values, having no logical connection, not even that of suggestion, with the other material of the song.

The ballad above quoted offers an example of the former class. Without having a perfectly definite connection with the words to which they are linked, the lines of the refrain fit so admirably with the story as greatly to enhance its charm—the “Alone, alonie O” corresponding to the mood of the mother; while “Down by the greenwood sidey O” conjures the atmosphere of the open, the scene of the ballad’s tragic episode; thus the two lines become practically fused into the stanza. This incorporation of the refrain as part of the stanza offers an analogy for what occurs in the musical settings of some of the ballads, where the refrain is an integral part of the musical phrase, its conclusion rather than an additional melodic figure:

THE GREENWOOD SIDE



In gathering these mountain survivals no single experience was more delightful than hearing this ballad with its lovely double refrain: “Alone, alonie O” and “Down by the greenwood sidey O.” The special pleasure in hearing this ballad in the Kentucky highlands was due to its high quality of completeness as music and poetry; often the survivals discovered in these mountain regions are so fragmentary, so indefinite in form, so unconvincing, they are almost worthless to one who seeks for a version intact and beautiful; hence the gratification in finding this one with its integrity of text, its music so beautiful, balanced, pure. Whatever its source, its loveliness is unquestionable and recalls the saying: “A good melody is for all time.” Its recurring lines link it to *The Cruel Mother* in Kinloch’s *Ancient Scottish Ballads*, whose refrain consists of the lines, “All alone and alonie” and “Down by the greenwood sae bonnie.”

The repetitional element of another ballad heard in the mountains—*Lord Randal*—is a more organic part of the story than is the reiteration in *The Greenwood Side*:

Where have you been Randal, it's Randal my son?
 Where have you been Randal, my pretty sweet one?
 O I've been a-courting; mother, make my bed soon,
 For I'm sick at the heart and I fain would lie down.

What did you have for your supper, it's Randal my son?
 What did you have for your supper, my pretty sweet one?
 Fried eels and fresh butter; mother, make my bed soon,
 For I'm sick at the heart and I fain would lie down.

What will you leave to your father, it's Randal my son?
 What will you leave to your father, my pretty sweet one?
 My land and fine buildings; mother, make my bed soon,
 For I'm sick at the heart and I fain would lie down.

Here indeed the repetition becomes part of the narrative and serves to stamp upon the mind the bitterness and gloom of the last stanza, recounting the legacy to the sweetheart—"a rope and a gallows"—and to the mother "A dead son to bury." The impressiveness is enhanced through the constant recurrence of certain phrases and the incremental additions with their cumulative effect of horror. The music to which the mountaineers sing this ballad of treachery shares what has been termed the "abounding triple measure" of the verses and is akin to the Scotch version found in *Songs of Scotland*:

Lord Randal

Knott Co. Ky.



Lord Ronald

Songs of Scotland



Two other well-known ballads—Son Davie and Edward—are similar in form, and no unusual analytical power is needed to prove that they would be less effective if built upon any other plan. As in these two ballads and Lord Randal, the recurrent units and the dramatic augmentations form the frame-work of The Gallows Tree (The Maid and The Gallows 95¹), the text

¹ Numbers refer to the Cambridge edition of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.

being little more than a "progressive refrain" or "incremental refrain in dialogue:"

O slack that rope, O slack that rope,
O slack it for a while;
I see my father coming,
He's travelled many a mile.

O have you come to bring me gold,
Have you come to pay my fee?
Or have you come to see me hung
All on the gallows tree?

I've neither come to bring you gold,
Neither to pay your fee,
But I have come to see you hung
Upon the gallows tree.

So on, through the appearance of the mother, brother, sister, till finally the true love arrives:

O I have come to bring you gold,
I've come to pay your fee;
I have not come to see you hung
But to take you home with me.

This treatment of a dramatic situation is one of the simplest and oldest, its simplicity and its element of repetition commending themselves to communal presentation. As appears, the pattern is so clear, defined and effective, it obviously appeals to popular taste; it is easy to see how, having once heard it, the chorus could add stanzas indefinitely. Numerous ballads of this type are proof of its attraction for the general. A notable instance is that of False Lamkin, which, it has been said, might be continued as long as there are any feminine relatives to be named. What beauty this simple form may attain is seen in that Sicilian ballad of barter, The Noble Sibilla, whose haunting beauty of rhythm and suggestion can scarcely be overestimated, its richness of detail contrasting with the bareness of poetic substance in The Gallows Tree:

O sailor sailing, always sailing,
Tell me how does the sea-wind blow?
Be it the South wind, be it the North wind,
To my father I will go.
O my father, my dear father!
Wilt thou not come and ransom me?
"O my daughter, my dear daughter,
Tell me what must thy ransom be?"

Three gold lions, three gold falcons,
Four gold columns it must be.
"I cannot part with so much treasure,
How much better to part with thee."

Appeal is made to mother, brother, sister—finally to the faithful husband:

O sailor sailing, always sailing,
Tell me how does the sea-wind blow?
Be it Sirocco or Tramontana,
To my husband I will go.

O my husband, my dear husband,
Wilt thou not come and ransom me?
"O my lady, my dear lady,
Tell me what must thy ransom be?"

Three gold lions, three gold falcons,
Four gold columns it must be.
"Better to part with all my treasure,
Enough that I never part with thee."

Though so highly elaborated in the earlier portions, it may be noted that at the point of the climax *The Noble Sibilla*, like *The Gallows Tree*, assumes the simplest form—the story being borne forward by the three stanzas, which themselves have the singing repetitional quality of a refrain.

The various refrains accompanying different versions of a ballad frequently offer interesting material for comment and comparison. The mountain version of *The Farmer's Curst Wife* (278), called *The Old Farmer's Wife*, contains a refrain which has neither beauty nor sense: "Ti o raddleing day," in contrast with that of the Burns version, *Kellyburn Braes*, which the Scotch poet claimed was traditional: "Hey and the rue grows bonny wi' thyme," "and the thyme it is withered and the rue is in prime." The mountain version is more closely allied in spirit to the *Sussex Whistling Song*, (*Percy Society*, Vol. XVII), sung to the tune of *Lilliebullero*, the whistlers joining in with zest on the refrain.

Apropos of the words, "Hey and the rue grows bonny wi' thyme," it may be remarked that many of the most charming refrains are those with flowery allusions, stock material of the ballads—the poignancy of the ballad often being enhanced by the contrast between the lovely suggestion of the refrain and the horror of the story. A striking example is that offered by a version of *The Cruel Mother* called *Fine Flowers in the Valley*:

She sat down below a thorn,
Fine flowers in the valley;
 And there she has her sweet babe born,
And the green leaves they grow rarely.

Nearly identical is the refrain with that of another ballad of domestic tragedy, *The Cruel Brother*:

There was three sisters in a ha',
Fine flowers i' the valley;
 There came three knights among them a',
The red, green and the yellow.

Another version of the latter ballad, called *The Bride's Testament*, has the charming flower refrain:

There were three ladies playing at the ba'
With a heigh ho! and a lily gay;
 There came a knight played o'er them a',
And the primrose spreads so sweetly.

Again in *The Three Knights*—so persistently did the form haunt popular imagination:

There did three knights come from the west,
With a heigh and the lily oh!
 And these three knights courted one lady,
As the rose was so sweetly blown.

That high authority on all that pertains to balladry, Professor Gummere, cautions the reader against assuming "a provocative intention where none is meant"; yet it would be a poor fancy which did not discern a romantic flavor in the first line of the refrain in *The Minister's Daughter* of Newarke quoted below, and that did not leap forward with sombre premonition on hearing the burden's second motif:

The minister's dochter o' Newarke,
Hey wi' the rose and the lindie O,
 Has fa'en in love wi' her father's clerk,
Alane by the green burn sidie O.

There can be no doubt that in such a ballad as this, driving on toward a tragic denouement, a distinct æsthetic effect is produced by the felicity of suggestion in the refrain—overshadowed more and more by the cumulative sombreness of the story—the charm of the refrain momentarily sweeping the fancy away, only to have it startlingly recalled by the heartbreaking climax. On the other hand, when the ballad is more cheerful in mood—less of what Autolycus calls a "very pitiful" strain and the mountaineers "a hurtin' tune"—the flowery element helps to sustain

the romantic tenor of the song. An example is found in the phrases following every stanza of a sailor-lover song extremely popular in the mountains and variously called Jackero, Jack Monroe and Jack the Sailor:

There was a wealthy merchant,
In London he did dwell;
He had one only daughter,
The truth to you I'll tell;
*Sing high and sing low,
And sing lay the lily low.*

This refrain has a variant, "Sing high and sing low and sing fare you well my dear," with the added merit of being more in the spirit of the story. To a song taking its title from the first line, "Young Johnny came from Ireland," belongs another variant of Jackero's refrain:

*O lily, lily, lily,
O lily, lily, O.*

A prime evidence of the æsthetic values of these repetitional elements lies in the fact that it is often some particularly haunting refrain which makes one version of a ballad more prized than another. Much of the pity aroused by a certain version of *The Twa Sisters*—one of those ballads of domestic tragedy alluded to above—is due to the plaintive long drawn out vocables of that truly magical interjection, *Binnorie O Binnorie*:

There was two sisters in a bower,
Binnorie O Binnorie;
There came a knight to be their wooer,
By the bonny mill-dams of Binnorie.

The mood of another version is similarly influenced by the emotional suggestion and rhythmic magic of its verbal iterations:

There was two sisters in a bower,
Edinburgh, Edinburgh;
There was two sisters in a bower,
Sterling for ay,
There came a knight to be their wooer,
So bonny St. Johnson stands fair upon Tay.

This refrain, uniting the spurring effect of a slogan with romantic and imaginative elements, lifts the heart, quickens the pulses, creates that tension which it is the function of all great art to induce, though such tension is finally relaxed, leaving a mood of peace, rest, satisfaction. The names of the three cities haunt the memory and prick the fancy even of those unfamiliar

with their associations, reminding one of the old father in the Beaumont and Fletcher comedy: "Though I do know no Greek I like the sound on't." In contrast with the refrain above quoted, bearing no obvious connection with the remainder of the ballad, may be cited the explicit and direct appeal of recurrent lines in another familiar but ever stirring ballad:

Hie upon hielands
And low upon Tay,
Bonnie George Campbell
Rode out on a day.

*Saddled and bridled
And gallant rode he;
Hame came his gude horse,
But never came he.*

Inarticulate to us but possibly the survival of a dignified and classical refrain is the "derry down, down, derry down" of an uncouth traveler's song recounting experiences at a house where a night's lodging had been asked. This song of the mountains is without interest save for its refrain, which, especially in its last line, bears kinship with the "Down a down, hay down, hay down" of the Three Ravens. The original form is said to have been: Hai down ir deri danno, interpreted as "Come, let us hasten to the sacred grove"—the burden of an old Druidical chant, assembling the people to religious rites. Some intrinsic virtue—of incantation, what not, challenging elucidation from the mystics—seems to inhere in these syllables, which in one order or another recur through English song, familiarly in Shakespeare, perhaps less familiarly in The Miller and The King's Daughter:

There were two sisters, they went a-playing,
With hie downe, downe, a downe a;
To see their father's ships sayling in,
With a hie downe, downe, a downe a.

Dandroo, a mountain version of The Wife Wrapped in Wether Skin (277) has an elaborate if nonsensical refrain—the theme being one which has furnished material for ballads and folk-tales innumerable, not to mention The Taming of the Shrew:

*Clima clash ta ma clango,
Old Jerry mingo, big Jerry mingo, little Jerry mingo,
Dandroo, dandroo.*

This has neither the lilting if inelegant quality of "Riffly, raffly, now, now, now" of the version The Laird of Fife, nor the

verbal as well as rhythmical charm of "Hollin, green hollin," in the version Sweet Robin; yet sung in a rushing tempo, with no regard for pauses, the Romany tang of Dandroo is not without exhilarating effect—the climactic punishment of the nagging wife being always received with enthusiasm in the mountains.

A story rehearsing the bringing of a husband to submission furnishes an example of the use of meaningless syllables for their rhythmical values:

There was a fair damsel of Colchester,
Tum a roddle lol di dolt,
Tum a roddle lol di day.
 And there a clothier courted her,
Tum a roddle lol di dolt, etc.;
 For three months' space, both night and day,
Tum a roddle, etc.;
 And yet the damsel still said nay,
Tum a roddle, etc.

In somewhat similar category as to its refrain is The Miller's Three Sons (Christie):

There was an old miller, he lived all alone;
 He had three sons, they were all men grown;
 And when he came to die, he made his will;
 He had nothing to will but a little old mill,
Sing Whack fol de riddle ding, tu ri riley,
Fo, tu rol, tu addle ding a day.

The mountain classic, Sourwood Mountain, is an example of songs more or less nonsensical throughout, the meaningless syllables of the refrain nevertheless often adding a zest to the performance:

Chickens am a-crowing in the Sourwood Mountain;
Hey di ying ding diddle la la day.

This is a good example of the ballad without formal beginning or ending, resembling the imaginary line moving indefinitely through space; as it is sung, everybody wants to add a line or stanza; herein it offers an authoritative instance of ballad-making in process—the incremental additions being forthcoming as long as the inspiration of the crowd lasts.

Slightly less popular is the Swapping Song quoted in the American Folk Lore Journal, whose refrain hovers on the border of sense, some of the words connoting ideas if not a sequence of thought:

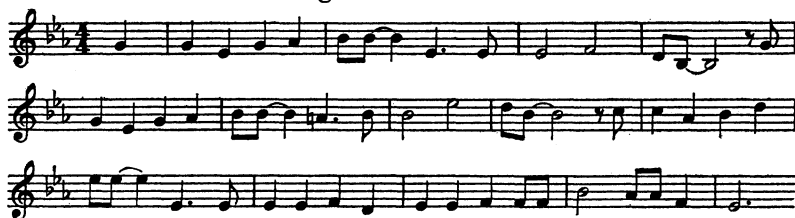
When I was a little boy, I lived by myself,
 And all the bread and cheese I had I laid upon the shelf;
Tum a wing waddle ding a
Jack straw straddle ding a
John far faddle ding,
A long way home.

An instance of a refrain lacking reference to the other words of a ballad, in no way serving as comment on the verses it accompanies, is the double refrain of *Bangum and The Boar*, a fragment of *Sir Rylas* (18). Though tangible meaning is lacking, there is a vivacity in the refrain, which one can imagine was sung with gusto by some company of early English huntsmen, as it is to-day sung by the Kentucky mountaineers—themselves doughty Nim-rods:

There is a wild boar in these woods,
Dillom dom diddle.
 There is a wild boar in these woods,
Dillom dom diddle.
 He eats our flesh and drinks our blood
Tum a qui quiddle quo gum.

The music of this ballad partakes of the boisterous, rollicking character of the words, the refrain being sung to a figure which answers rather than completes the musical phrase set forth by the stanza proper:

Bangum and The Boar



The Old World original of this lively ballad narrates the rescue of a lady from an evil giant, the hero being romantically named *Sir Lionel* or *Sir Rylas*. One Old World version contains the charming refrain: "And the Norlan' flowers bloom bonny."

Refrains are particularly adapted to songs of sentiment, as is illustrated by our contemporary products as well as by these survivals. An old English melody sung in the mountains, *The Gardener*, gains a quaintly touching character from its burden:

As I was a-walking down by the sea-shore,
 The wind it did whistle and the sea it did roar;
 Crying: "O my love's lost, he's the one I adore;
He's gone where I never shall see him more."

Here the refrain, while not part of the story, partakes of its melancholy, anticipates and emphasizes the narrative telling how the girl pines for her lover and finally casts herself into the sea to be joined with him in death. In another song of parted lovers the heroine protests at the end: "I never shall marry till my John comes again."

More in the nature of choruses are the recurrent lines of The Golden Willow Tree (The Sweet Trinity 286). and of the Mermaid (289). There is a fine swinging rhythm in the refrains of these songs which are not only a delight to the singer but have moreover a definite bearing upon the narrative. The Golden Willow Tree has an interwoven chorus:

I had a little ship and I sailed her on the sea,
Crying: "O the land that lies so low";
 I had a little ship and I sailed her on the sea,
 And she went by the name of The Golden Willow Tree—
As she sailed in the lowlands, low, low, low,
As she sailed in the lowlands low.

In another mountain version, The Merry Golden Tree, whose form is similar to a setting found in Moffat's Minstrelsy of England, the refrain follows the stanza:

I had a little ship and I sailed her on the sea,
 And she went by the name of The Merry Golden Tree,
As we sailed in the lonesome lowlands low,
As we sailed upon the lowlands low.

A rousing chorus accompanies The Mermaid, sung by the mountaineers with much spirit:

Last Friday morning as we set sail,
 Not very far from land,
 We all espied a fair mermaid
 With a comb and a glass in her hand, in her hand,
 With a comb and a glass in her hand.
The stormy winds do blow, blow, blow;
And the raging seas how they roar!
And us poor sailors climbing to the top,
And the land all a-lying down below, down below,
And the land all a-lying down below.

Moffat's Minstrelsy also contains a version of this vivacious nautical lay, with a chorus at the end of the stanza. The above quoted lines illustrate how the choral element may be elaborated till it becomes more than a recurrent line, phrase or word, takes the form of the stanza itself, equalling it in length and having a musical figure that varies from the melody of the stanza proper.

Hence such examples are an interesting commentary on musical and literary evolution. Again, however, the refrain is but a repetition of a word or so of the stanza, as in Lord Lovel:

Lord Lovel he stood at his castle wall,
Combing his milk-white steed;
Down came the Lady Nancie Belle,
A-wishing her lover good speed, speed, speed,
A-wishing her lover good speed.

In contrast with this slight elaboration other mountain survivals have a greater expansion of this form, interestingly exemplified by Loving Hannah:

Loving Hannah, loving Hannah,
Come give to me your hand;
And say if you marry
That I shall be the man (repeat twice)
And say if you marry
That I shall be the man.

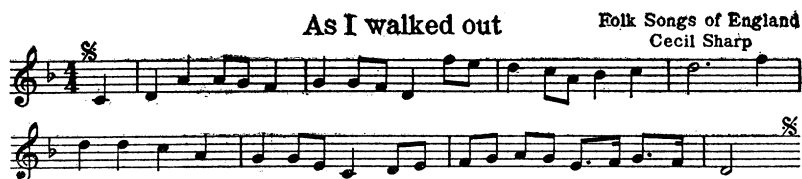
Thus the last line of the original stanza is twice repeated; then, to make assurance doubly sure, the ardent lover returns to the penultimate line, singing it and the following one in a final intensity of persuasion. By these repetitions the musical setting of the stanza is extended over sixteen measures; thereby a greater breadth of melody and a more flexible musical figure are achieved. Mr. Henry Krehbiel has noted the unmistakable Scotch character of this air, and the singular conclusion on the second interval of the scale, "inviting a minor close in a predominantly major melody."

Another instance of such expansion is found in the mountain version of *As I Walked Out*, whose refrain doubles the length of the melody and increases its sweep. An example of the refrain merely repeating the melody of the stanza proper is found in an English version of the same song.

As I walked out

Ky. Mountain version





In the mountain version of this air, as in *Loving Hannah*, the elaboration balances the foregoing section, enhances its beauty, increases the fluency of the musical design.

Whatever other points of interest the refrains found in the mountain regions may have, the fact that they have come so far from their source in the England and Scotland of centuries ago and have so long persisted is proof of their vital æsthetic quality, their possession of some singularly preservative essence. Evidently theirs is an enduring charm for ear and imagination; theirs a lasting appeal to that element of human mood which, though ever ready for fresh adventure, yet finds deep enchantment in the familiar. Be they ever so time-worn, be they even unintelligible, their power of incantation is so great as to add to the enjoyment of their hearer and to pique his curiosity about the secret of their rhythmic magic. The most casual student of Shakespeare can of course bear testimony on the subject—to the irresistible effect, for instance, of the recurrent line in

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey and a ho and a hey nonino.

Yet when Ophelia sings

They bore him bare-faced on the bier,
Hey non nonny, nonny, hey nonny,

the almost identical words take on the funeral pace dictated by the preceding line and add to the dirge-like monotony, the chanting effect of the rhythm. The spell unflinching exerted by the Shakespearean refrains offers preëminent example of their author's instinct for magic rhythm. Throughout the plays how frequent the inclusion of, or reference to, ballads with refrains. If Shakespeare had small Latin and less Greek, he doubtless knew well his English balladry, drawing from it to add enlivening touches to his characters and situations, but with still greater effect using it in those moments of high tension and profound feeling when tragedy is at its darkest; such a moment is *Desdemona's* when, with her premonition of disaster, she remembers *Barbara's* song of willow:

An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune,
And she died singing it; that song to-night
Will not go from my mind.

Nor, when once heard, does it ever pass from the memory of its hearers, any more than do the refrains of numerous other old songs whereby Shakespeare and the anonymous authors of the ballads cast an enduring spell upon that popular taste which knows what it likes without understanding the cause of its pleasure, and likewise upon that more cultivated sense, part of whose keenest enjoyment springs from at least an approximate recognition of the sources of its gratification.

Lecturing on the English ballads to his Japanese students, Lafcadio Hearn expressed the opinion that "most of our ballad burthens represent the only extant portions of hundreds of older compositions that have been forever lost." If this be true, it invests the far wandering strains of the Kentucky mountains with an even more venerable antiquity than may at first be suspected from their association with seventeenth and eighteenth century ballads. Here is an immortality devoutly to be envied by contemporary inventors of new melodies, new verses. Happy indeed the musician or poet from whose inspiration spring melodies or words so magical, clinging to the memory of generations so pertinaciously as do these ancient refrains—a people's collaboration with its perhaps never to be identified poets. With their abiding charm well have these old burthens been described as an "imperious choral . . . a murmur of voices in concert, borne over great stretches of space and through many changes of time."